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*Recent events have shown just how vital a part of Chinese life and politics the Internet has become, so China Beat asked sociologist Yang Guobin, who has been researching the topic to share some of his thoughts with our readers about this important subject. Here is his guest post, which ties together two recent developments that highlight sources of trust and distrust in cyberspace and other realms.*  
By [Guobin Yang](#)

On December 15, 2007, [China Digital Times](#) posted a story about last year's "Tigergate incident." Titled "[The Truth is More Endangered than Tigers in China](#)," the story begins:

The "[South China Tiger](#)" [华南虎] saga continues. Now known as "Tigergate" among Chinese netizens, this event will no doubt be one of the top media/internet stories of 2007. On December 2nd, NetEase (one of China's leading news portals) published [all 40 digital photos](#) that farmer Zhou Zhenglong alleged he took of the tiger and also published six independent experts' evaluations of the authenticity of these photos. These six independent third party evaluations include no less than American Chinese criminologist [Henry Lee](#) (李昌钰), the [China Photographers Association](#) (CPA)'s digital photo authentication center, and China's top South China Tiger expert Hu Huijian (胡慧建). And all of their evaluations of the tiger photo reached the same conclusion: they're fake.

The story goes back to October. On October 12, 2007, the Shaanxi Forestry Bureau announced at a news conference the discovery of a South China tiger believed to be extinct in the wild. The proof of the discovery was a photograph taken by a peasant hunter called Zhou Zhenglong. The photograph was allegedly authenticated by a team of scientists and experts the local government had commissioned to appraise it. Yet as soon as the photograph was released on the internet, China's inquisitive netizens challenged its authenticity. On November 16, someone posted the image of a traditional Chinese New Year tiger painting in an internet forum, contending that Zhou's tiger was a photo of the tiger in the painting. Even as the evidence overwhelmingly showed that Zhou's photograph was a forgery, the Shaanxi Forestry Bureau remained evasive and refused to acknowledge the truth. Lasting for months, the online debates among frustrated netizens became a virtual quest for truth that was just not forthcoming.

The "Tigergate" incident has symbolic significance. As the CDT posting puts it, it is "a reflection of the existing crisis of public trust in China society." It reflects citizens' yearning for trust.

Not only do people use the internet in search of real-world trust, as the Tigergate case shows, but there are many acts of trust in cyberspace. This is not to say there is no dark matter on the internet. Cyberspace is no more a pure land than other places. And yet, talk to any "net friends" (网友), and they usually have a supply of stories about friendship, love, philanthropy, understanding, trust, and solidarity in virtual reality.

But let me turn to the recent Sichuan earthquakes. One striking thing about public responses to the earthquakes was the demonstration of public trust. According to a survey of 523 respondents conducted on June 1, 2008 by researchers from Qinghua University, the internet was the most important channel of information after the earthquake, while television came the second and newspapers the third. The sample is admittedly small, but it is still revealing and thought-provoking. If it is true that more people used the internet than television for information, it indicates, among other things, a high degree of trust in information online.

Another example of such trust was the amount of donations people made online. Many people donated online. In partnership with several other web sites and Jet Li's One Foundation, Tianya.com began to solicit online donations for disaster relief on the day of the earthquake. Three days later, on May 15, it had already raised 24 million Yuan (RMB). Most of this amount came from individual online donors, who would have to trust the web sites they use to make monetary donations.

Expressions of online trust interacted with and were matched by the outpourings of trust offline. Han Hai Sha, an environmental and educational NGO in Beijing, raised money, medicine, tents, and other materials and equipment for disaster relief within days of the earthquakes. Initially, however, activists in this small NGO were at a loss about how to transport these donations to the distant earthquake regions in Sichuan. They then thought of a friend in an internet-based automobile friendship club (che you hui 车友会). This individual immediately posted messages in the web sites of several such clubs. Within about ten minutes, Han Hai Sha had recruited ten netizens, who all volunteered to provide free transportation with their own automobiles at their own costs (which included expenses for gas, meals, and accommodation for a 4-5 day round trip from Beijing to Chengdu).

These acts of trust among common citizens, online and offline, formed a contrast with a deep-seated distrust of government officials. Entertaining doubts about whether local government officials would put the donations to proper use, many people resorted to the internet to push for transparency and accountability. In the middle of all the relief efforts, netizens revealed online, complete with digital photographs, "disaster only" tents showing up in the streets in Chengdu when they should have belonged to the much more heavily hit earthquake regions. In response to such public demands, the Chinese government issued policy guidelines avowing severe punishment of corruption related to earthquake donations.

In China today, stories about the lack of trust are many and all too familiar: People have poor trust not just in government officials, businesses, and police, but also in teachers, professors, scientists, and even physicians. There are fake foodstuffs, fake brand-name liquor, fake medicine, fake diplomas, fake beauty products. Everything is fake. Nothing and nobody can be trusted. At least for some people, that seems to be China's harsh reality.

Why can there be trust in virtual reality when it is lacking in "real" reality? Why do people seek trust in cyberspace rather than in their communities? This puzzling phenomenon probably says more about the sorry condition of community than about the internet. If the degree of trust is a good measure, its weakness indicates the weakness of community. If people go online in search of trust, does it mean that there is an alternative community online? Do online communities make up for the poverty of community in the "real" world? Are they signs of escape or do they signal new practices of civic engagement? Contrasting citizens' quests for trust in the TigerGate incident and after the Sichuan earthquakes opens up some interesting questions.